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ABSTRACT

Indiana 4-H Youth Programs are being used to enhance the quality of life for troubled adolescents in residential group homes and economically disadvantaged urban areas and to provide summer-school programs for children of migrant farm workers. Four basic types of program delivery modes exist in Indiana: clubs, junior leader program activities, educational trips and summer programs, and school enrichment educational units. All of these program modes work because they correspond to the developmental needs of the youth participants. However, this program has been perceived as strictly rural and related to agriculture. Even for troubled rural youth dealing with abuse, domestic violence, etc., 4-H offers a safety net for caring adults to interact with youth. (NB)

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4-H YOUTH PROGRAMS - ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE

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Abstract

Indiana 4-H Youth programs are being used to enhance the quality of life for troubled adolescents in residential group homes and economically disadvantaged urban areas, as well as summer-school programs for children of migrant farm workers. Several programs are described, strategies for service delivery are examined, and the elements of successful programming are delineated.

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General Background

4-H is the only federally funded educational youth program that operates in almost every county in the United States. The four H's stand for head, hands, heart, and health.

"I pledge my head to clearer thinking; my heart to greater loyalty; my hands to larger service; and my health to better living for my club, my community, my country and my world."

The 4-H motto, to make the best better, and the pledge portray the traditions and values on which 4-H is based and provide direction for programming and youth activities.

For people brought up in the 4-H tradition these values and activities seem second nature. For individuals not familiar with 4-H, it is a non-formal educational system pregnant with innovative, hands-on experiential educational opportunities waiting to be discovered.

Programs

Four basic types of program delivery modes exist in Indiana:

1) Clubs. Often conducted in the homes of volunteers and focused on learning experiences that enhance group decision making, communication, and social skills through the completion of projects. These learning experiences often result in tangible products which can be displayed or performances that can be observed. Recognition upon completion of the projects is tangible in the form of ribbons, awards, or certificates generally given at county and state fairs.

2) Junior leader program activities. Focus on community service, cooperative learning, and leadership development. Through community service projects, youth from 14 to 19 years of age learn to plan projects, work in committees, and develop leadership skills.

3) Educational trips and summer programs. Create additional opportunities for youth to explore the world and the contribution they can make to society. For

example, trips to Washington, D.C., focus on citizenship.

4) School enrichment educational units. Offered in school settings as part of the regular curriculum or as extra-curricular activities.

These programs have worked because they correspond to the developmental needs of the youth participants. For the young adolescent, the 4-H program creates a sense of belonging through group activities. It allows youth participants interested in greater peer interaction the opportunity to interface with other youth in their neighborhood, town, county, and state. For some, it allows interaction on national and international levels. The hands-on activities and projects which result in a tangible product made by the participants create an atmosphere of accomplishment and enhance self-esteem through formal public recognition. The youth participants also have an opportunity to interact with adult leaders and other youth who provide support and act as role models. The 4-H club is particularly well suited for early adolescents.

The junior leader organization, which focuses on leadership development and community service through program planning, reflects the development shift from concrete to more complex thinking which characterizes middle to late adolescence. The planning of community service projects and other social activities in an atmosphere of "supervised" autonomy provides youth the opportunity to develop independence and responsibility.

However, these programs have been perceived as strictly rural and related to agriculture alone. For rural youth, 4-H has proved to be an effective tool for development. Even for troubled rural youth dealing with abuse, domestic violence, and other problems, 4-H offers a safety net whereby caring adults interact with youth. Today's 4-H has much to offer urban and suburban, as well as troubled, youth regardless of their location.

Because 4-H is developmentally appropriate for adolescents in general, 4-H projects and programs can be particularly useful when working with troubled adolescents. First, 4-H programs and projects are generally led by adult volunteers

from the youth's neighborhood. Therefore, a caring adult serves as a role model and mentor. In some cases the county 4-H youth professional begins the program and project, then recruits adults from the neighborhood. Second, the 4-H tradition of hands-on experiential learning provides youth the opportunity to create a tangible product. In the case of a summer program for the children of migrant farm workers, the projects become a vehicle whereby individual accomplishment is recognized. Third, public recognition is a part of the overall 4-H tradition. Every child who participates in a 4-H project or program generally receives some type of recognition, a certificate of participation, a ribbon, button, or even a sticker and acknowledgement from adults that their work is good and that they are good people. In the case of a young boy from a group home who showed his rabbit at a county fair, this recognition proved to be a valuable boost to his self-esteem. Fourth, many of the projects, such as aerospace, electronics, and photography, are significant for troubled adolescents and present an introduction to vocational opportunities. Additionally, even more traditional projects with plants and animals provide valuable

lessons about biology, health, and respect for life.

Aside from 4-H programs such as summer school for children of migrant farm workers and group homes which can be adapted for youth in non-traditional settings, 4-H has developed programs specifically geared to enhance the quality of life of youth. These projects are based on the belief that youth and adults working together can enhance their community and create positive environments for human beings.

1) Partners in Prevention is a state-funded project which helps at-risk youth gain life skills, such as goal setting, decision making, acceptance of one's limitations, and acknowledgement of one's strengths, while becoming involved in their community. Volunteer community teams of youth and adults develop community specific proposals which implement one of three tested 4-H programs: a) PROJECT LEAD (Legal Education to Avoid Delinquency), b) Dare for Youth Pride/TNT (Teens Networking for Teens), or c) Exploring 4-H (schoolage child-care program for 6-9 year olds).

2) During a two-day conference Prevention Connection focuses on how youth and adults can work together to create a positive environment through which county teams of three youth and two adults develop community specific projects. One county group from a residential youth detention center attended the conference and developed a plan to organize a youth council at their school.

Strategies for Service Delivery

Two main strategies for service delivery have evolved through Indiana's efforts to reach troubled adolescents. First, building community interaction based on accountability, professionalism, and care is essential. Second, existing program resources are reshaped for target audiences in non-traditional settings.

1) Community interaction. In most communities in Indiana, 4-H has a proven track record in the nonformal education of youth. Professional youth agents are accountable to a community advisory board and are known for their caring work with youth. There exists a grassroots network of 4-H alumni, volunteers, parents, and youth

that makes 4-H a powerful yet non-advocacy organization. Based on this network, 4-H is in a unique position to a) facilitate interagency cooperation and program planning, b) provide nonformal educational services to other organizations, such as schools, child-care centers, and group homes, and c) train local volunteers to work with youth in their own communities. These activities have helped 4-H reach over 211,000 youth in 1991 in Indiana and over 5 million nationwide.

The emphasis on community interaction and involvement in the issues related to troubled adolescents also provides a specific challenge. The general public's perception that 4-H is a rural program with agricultural and home economics projects needs to be changed through public awareness activities and increased visibility in urban and non-traditional settings.

2) Reshape existing resources. Indiana 4-H has an extensive repertoire of educational programs and activities. Many of the projects have been organized through club meetings and designed for exhibition at a county fair. The hands-on experiential learning activities can be reshaped for other

delivery modes, such as an intensive two-week summer enrichment program for children of migrant farm workers or a week-long project in a residential youth group home.

The efforts to reshape educational materials also present a challenge. 4-H materials are generally presented by adult volunteers, often in family settings. Therefore, the reshaping of materials requires a retraining or, more appropriately, ongoing training of volunteers to utilize these educational materials with troubled adolescents and to help them understand their new audiences. It also requires recruitment of volunteers from the communities in which the program will be developed and valued.

Elements of Successful Programs

Peter Scales (1991) in his recent book, A Portrait of Young Adolescents in the 1990's: Implications for Promoting Healthy Growth and Development, identified seven developmental needs of young people, including 1) positive social interaction with adults and peers, 2) structure and clear limits, 3) physical activity, 4) creative

expression, 5) competence and achievement, 6) meaningful participation in schools and community, and 7) opportunities for self-definition.

4-H programs respond to these needs: 1) 4-H programs are generally led by adult volunteers with ample opportunity in group settings to interact with both adults and peers. 2 & 3) The educational activities are generally structured and have hands-on experiential learning experiences which require physical involvement. 4 & 5) Through this learning experience youth have an opportunity to develop creativity, to complete a project, and to receive recognition upon completion and/or for participation. 6) Meaningful participation in community acitivities is encouraged, particularly in the 14-19 year old junior leader activities. 7) Opportunities for self-definition arise through project choices.

Conclusion

The Indiana 4-H youth program is facing the challenge of working with troubled adolescents through community involvement and in designing and/or reshaping educational materials to meet their particular

needs. Through this effort a positive environment for youth can be created.